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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000097

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [SCUL](#) [ECON](#) [TN](#)
SUBJECT: TONGA'S CROWN PRINCE FAVORS CHANGE ASAP

REF: A. 05 SUVA 494
[1](#)B. SUVA 52
[1](#)C. 05 SUVA 613

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Section 1.5 (B,D)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Tonga's Crown Prince Tupouto'a has seen the light: reform to a more democratic system needs to happen ASAP. He envisions a constitutional monarchy with the King delegating all day-to-day government business to an elected government. The current King, ill in New Zealand, has not signed off on the plan, or on Tupouto'a's recently engineered change in Prime Minister from Prince Lavaka'ata (an anti-democrat) to Dr. Fred Sevele (a pro-democracy commoner). Sevele receives mixed reviews, with some observers lauding his abilities and democratic instincts, and others alleging he will turn a blind eye at business malfeasance, including by the royal family. Tupouto'a asked USG assistance with journalist training, which prompts a repeat of our plea for a PD position. See paragraphs 9 and 10 for bio notes. End Summary.

Tonga's public lacks "restraint"

[1](#)2. (C) Crown Prince Tupouto'a and the Ambassador met on March 2, resuming an acquaintance from the late 1990s. Tupouto'a recalled their past conversations about prospects for democratic reform in Tonga. Back then, he had expressed some willingness to contemplate a degree of democratic reform for sometime in the future. Now, he made clear, his thinking has evolved. Tupouto'a sees the world in "class" terms. Traditionally, in England (and Tonga) lower classes observed, and attempted to emulate, upper classes who behaved with "restraint." Tupouto'a recalled the restrained emotion at Churchill's funeral and compared it to the outpouring of grief at Princess Diana's. Not directly stated, but certainly on his mind, was the outpouring of anti-royal sentiment by Tongans in Nuku'alofa's streets last September during a pro-democracy demonstration (Ref A).

Elected Parliament; reduced royal power ASAP

[1](#)3. (C) Given the public mood, Tupouto'a said he now accepts the need for political "change," and he has proposed to his father King Tupou IV that all members of Tonga's Parliament be elected by the public to three-year terms. The King would then select a Prime Minister from among those elected. The Prime Minister would have a five-year term. Tupouto'a said he borrowed the staggered term lengths from the French system, but he figures the French seven-year presidential term is too long for a Tonga PM, at least for now. Under the plan, the King, who has "so many powers," would delegate all day-to-day running of government to the Prime Minister. The

King's withdrawal from hands-on governing would be understood but not explicit, similar to the state of play in some other constitutional monarchies. Asked about the preferred pace of reform, Tupouto'a said: "as soon as possible." Events have made clear reform needs to happen, and slowing it will not be helpful. (We note this is exactly the message the Ambassador provided Princess Pilolevu last September at a time when Tupouto'a was out of town (Ref A).)

But it all depends on the ailing King

¶4. (C) Tupouto'a stressed that, while he has submitted his plan to the Palace, the King has not yet responded. King Tupou IV, age 87, has been in Auckland since just before Christmas for medical care. Tupouto'a indicated his father is not doing well. A source said the King has multiple serious ailments, some of which get better, some worse. Reportedly the King very much wants to return to Tonga, but the decision is in the hands of his doctors.

Acting PM waits for a blessing

¶5. (C) Separately, Acting Prime Minister Fred Sevele hinted to the Ambassador that he and Tupouto'a are prepared to implement a "surprising amount" of political reform very quickly, if Sevele receives the King's blessing as PM. Reportedly, a representative from the Palace recently traveled to Auckland at the Crown Prince's request to obtain the King's formal assent to Sevele's appointment, but the King responded that he wants to wait until returning to Tonga to make the decision. This was not seen as a "no," just a continuing "maybe." Comment: It is not clear how the Tupouto'a/Sevele reform plan meshes with the effort of a National Committee set up by Parliament to survey Tongan

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opinion (see septel). Tupouto'a and Sevele gave the impression they are ready to proceed, regardless of the survey. End comment.

Sibling rivalry

¶6. (C) Tupouto'a as Prince Regent, and apparently without clearance from the King, convinced his younger brother Prince Lavaka'ata to resign as PM in early February (Ref B). Tupouto'a noted to the Ambassador that Lavaka'ata had been "the wrong person in charge" last August when a public-service strike fanned flames of dissent and resulted in a settlement that has strained the government budget (Ref A). (We note that Tupouto'a, himself, was traveling in Europe and Africa during the entirety of the strike.) Lavaka'ata had been frustrated as PM (see ref C) and may not have required too much pushing. Still, we are told the resignation surprised the royal family in Auckland, and they may still be calculating how to respond. Asked what future roles Lavaka'ata might perform, Tupouto'a said his brother is "set for life" with a lease the Mormon Church recently negotiated to retain its high-school venue at an up-front fee of \$2 million plus \$90,000/year for the next ten years.

Sevele: business as usual?

¶7. (C) The Crown Prince has confidence in Acting PM Sevele, who was a pro-democracy People's Representative until the King elevated him, and three others, to Cabinet from the Parliament a year ago. Sevele owns Nuku'alofa's biggest grocery store and is a member of the commission that oversees pumpkin squash, Tonga's major export. Tupouto'a said Sevele "knows business and will facilitate it." Pro-democracy activist Akilisi Pohiva also respects Sevele, a long-time friend. Some prominent Tongans, including pro-democracy activist and former Police Minister Clive Edwards, are less enthusiastic, suggesting that Sevele has been involved in shady business dealings and, thus, may be inclined to cut Tupouto'a and other royals slack regarding sweetheart business arrangements which are a great frustration to many

ordinary Tongans. Also, Edwards, who represents Chinese retailers seeking operating permits, alleges that Sevele is thwarting such permits in order to protect Tongan retailers, including himself.

Request for journalist training

¶8. (SBU) Tupouto'a raised with the Ambassador two particular issues: deportees from the United States (subject of septel) and a need for young Tongans to obtain on-the-job journalism training. The Crown Prince believes (with some justification) that Tongan print journalists are amateurish. He suggested that finding internships for two or so from the next generation at small U.S. newspapers ("not the New York Times; maybe somewhere in Maine") would do Tongan print media a world of good. We promised to see what USG programs might be available. Comment: This raises again Embassy Suva's plea for a regional PD position, which could bring with it programming resources. End comment.

Bio Notes

¶9. (C) Tupouto'a is effete, snobbish, a dandy, who prefers to dress like a British colonial master, complete with pith helmet. He has a "villa" just outside Nuku'alofa, has a personal pilot to fly his vintage aircraft, and is a global traveler. Most all Tongans resent his lack of interest in local culture. Tupouto'a is a confirmed bachelor who is often surrounded by women friends. He suffers from type-2 diabetes, and is thrilled that a "wonder drug" which his San Francisco doctor prescribed a few months ago has helped him gain control, lose weight, and feel much better. A diplomatic source suggested the American "cure" has caused Tupouto'a to reinvigorate his appreciation for the U.S.

¶10. (C) The Crown Prince has strong connections to China, after previously having equally strong connections to Taiwan until the King shifted allegiances in 1998. Reportedly, Tupouto'a is in hock to a Chinese bank for a \$30 million unsecured loan, presumably used to finance some of his business ventures (Tonga's electric utility, a domestic airline, etc.). Advisors have urged him to find a way to jettison the loan before he becomes King. Responding to public dissatisfaction, he is working with Tonga's Ministry of Finance to sell off the electric utility. The Ministry is resisting any government buy-back, preferring to facilitate transfer to some private-oriented entity.

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